

CHAPTER 4

Narrative in Michael Jackson's *Bad*

The years 1987–1988 saw an exponential growth in Michael Jackson's musical and artistic development. After *Thriller*'s meteoric success, Jackson was encouraged by his producer, Quincy Jones, to write as many songs as possible on his 1987 release, *Bad*. This chapter presents Jackson primarily as a storyteller, and gives an in-depth exploration of his ability to employ the aspects of literary narrative: plot, perspective, characterization, setting, language, and genre, in order to engage a wide audience.

“This is the one where I'd asked him to write all the tunes. I could see him growing as an artist . . .”

—Quincy Jones¹

1987's *Bad* was a time of unmatched and unparalleled creativity for Michael Jackson. Jackson's anthology film was still being made, piecemeal, in between the dates of his *Bad* tour, which would successfully go on to break records of attendance throughout the globe. Jackson's tour, his first solo adult effort without his brothers, who had always been with him performing from the tender age of five, would be simultaneously one of the most difficult and rewarding experiences of the artist's life. As always, while on tour Jackson would visit as many hospitals and orphanages as he did stadiums. In every state he visited, Jackson would enquire about the welfare of children, how well they were taken care of, what looked-after children's experience was like in that city and in that corner of the world. This was Jackson's overriding reason for performing and touring. It gave him the platform from which to effect some social

change. In the United Kingdom, Jackson's Wembley Stadium performance would be visited by the Prince and Princess of Wales.²

The *Bad* album is imbued with many narrative qualities and has been chosen for study because it is a singular expression of Jackson's creativity and composition, both collaboratively and independently. It provides a lynchpin for the narrative techniques Jackson began to employ early in his career, with *Off The Wall*, techniques that maintained throughout his career, right up to his *Invincible* album. This chapter uses supporting material from short films, as well as close textual analysis of the lyrics, to discuss the literary aspects in individual songs from the *Bad* album, in order to illustrate Jackson's unique ability to communicate narrative.

Jackson would often describe the making of his music using the rhetoric and the field-specific lexis of painting, or weaving a tapestry. The purpose of both these crafts is to present narrative and sentiment. In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's definition of narrative corresponds with the way one views oneself and asserts that entire societal ideologies are constructed through the narratives which become dominant.³ For example, a Princess being saved by Prince Charming can, over time, become a societal code for women being intrinsically weaker than men. Narrative is integral for how we are and how we experience our world. It is through stories, narratives, and allegories that we begin to make sense of who we are.

Michael Jackson's *Bad* album, though overshadowed by the success of *Thriller*, bears the fruits of his storytelling efforts. It is also an album relatively unburdened by a severe need for reinvention, or one mired in the politics of the mainstream press. Having been afforded the freedom to do so, *Bad* exchanges the literal for the evocative, leading the listener and viewer down paths of emotional discovery, much in the same way a novelist leads their reader into the depths of a mystery or the lofty heights of a love story.

PLOT

We will consider Jackson's use of plot in the *Bad* track "Dirty Diana."⁴ Useful examples of particularly well known (and oft-recycled) plots are those from Ancient Greek tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex* and *The Theban Plays*.⁵ Many tragedies of this nature, as noted by Aristotle, have unique moments, moments of equilibrium (where all is well and at rest); peripeteia, where the tragic hero (usually of noble birth) finds themselves in a great reversal of fortune, otherwise known as a fall from grace.⁶ Value is often assigned to specific moments within a plot, based on where they are positioned. This value is assigned in terms of proximity to the resolution of the narrative. So plot,

though it may lack the necessary detail of a narrative, often has very clear structure.

“Dirty Diana” follows the following plot structure:

A. Equilibrium

- a. A groupie, her name may be “Diana” but this may also be a pseudonym, often waits at backstage doors in order to provide sexual favors for musicians, in exchange, she hopes, for a life of affluence and notoriety.⁷
- b. A (male) musician has a girlfriend.

B. Conflict

- a. The musician is propositioned by Diana, but he refuses.
- b. Eventually the musician begins a sexual relationship with Diana.
- c. At some point in the course of their infidelity, Diana invites the musician to her home.
- d. The musician realizes that he hasn’t called his girlfriend to confirm that he will be late.

C. Climax

- a. During the phone call Diana exposes the affair.⁸
- b. The ramifications of this revelation are most likely negative for the musician and his girlfriend, but not particularly for Diana.

As we can see, although the song does not provide a resolution or an anti-climax, a large part of what makes “Dirty Diana” such a compelling song are its basic plot points. The song begins in a state of equilibrium with, we assume, some element of faithfulness to the musician’s partner, or at least with the fact of the musician’s partner being unaware of his infidelities. These plot points are emphasized in the short film that accompanies the track, and we see conflict brewing in plot points B and C; however, it is interesting that Jackson and the film’s director Joe Pytko, chose not to visualize the sexual scenes or conflict in the lyrics of the song and instead opted for having “Diana” wait for Jackson inside a limousine. In the short film, shots of a scantily clad woman are interspersed with live action shots of Jackson performing on stage; the space between Diana’s silhouetted legs and the extreme shortness of her skirt are emphasized by the use of tight close-ups. The fact that she remains faceless gives the impression she is one of many. The visual world of Diana is visually dirtier and grimmer than the world of Jackson’s stage, while his white shirt contradicts the darkness of Diana’s clothing.

Plot point C is, arguably, the climax of the short series of points, but its closeness to the end of the song gives the event of the disclosure of the musician’s infidelity more gravitas than it might have, were to be found in the

middle of the sequence of events. What is particularly powerful and engaging in this use of plot is the fact that we don't see what happens after the "cat is out of the metaphorical bag," and as listeners/viewers we are left to decide for ourselves what happens next. This leaves the reader with a cliff-hanger effect. The use of plot, however, is only one very basic feature of narrative; the next aspect this chapter considers is "perspective."

PERSPECTIVE

A "perspective" or a point of view is a particularly powerful aspect of narrative. It is one of the key aspects that builds a story or narrative out of the basic bones of a plot. **Who** is telling the story and the way **they** perceive a series of events is often far more intriguing than the events themselves. For example, the use of a young girl, Scout, in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, strongly requires the reader to believe that the narrator of the story is transparent and entirely honest, that she hasn't yet learned to lie.⁹ This makes Scout's recollection of events credible in a way that the character Nick Carraway's from *The Great Gatsby* can never be. Nick is a very unreliable narrator, and the author, F. Scott Fitzgerald, leaves the reader unsure, while reading *The Great Gatsby*, as to whether Nick's entire summation of the novel's characters in the narrative are due to his own insecurities or to an infatuation with Gatsby.¹⁰ In any case, this ambiguity makes for genuinely exciting reading, because the reader must continually assess the information that an unreliable narrator gives, in order to gauge our level of belief in the version of events we are given. If we are observant, we can see the story that lies behind the one we are told. Great storytellers often use this technique to keep the reader/viewer engaged with the narrative. An excellent example of this is the 2000 film *Memento*, written by Christopher Nolan, where the sequence of events keeps unraveling for the main character, whose memory is continually being wiped clean. The viewer is positioned similarly to this character, so we encounter every new plot point for the first time with him; hence, we are more likely to be engaged with the events as we try and piece together what is going on.

In four tracks from *Bad*, Jackson uses narrative perspective to achieve different aims. In the first, "The Way You Make Me Feel," the use of first- and second-person pronouns "I," "me," and "you" create a sense of character but still places the emphasis on a monogamous relationship. The word "me" is repeated 52 times, "my" 29 times, "I" 8 times, and "you" 54 times. The heavy repetition of these pronouns creates a sense of intimacy, reiterated by Jackson's line "ain't nobody's business."¹¹ The privacy of the ensuing relationship that the song describes is of paramount importance. However, the

use of pronouns also indicates ownership. The first-person voice is the owner of the second person, “you.”

In “Leave Me Alone”, first and second pronouns are used quite differently. The word “me” is repeated about 47 times, “you” 28 times, and “I” 18 times.¹² The use of the pronouns to create perspective here builds a wall between the narrator and those that antagonize him; even the use of “you must fight” is used in a reflexive, generalizing way, as a writer might use “we” or “one” to indicate a general way of doing things.¹³ The narrative perspective emphasizes isolation and a state of being continually rebuffed.¹⁴

In the track “Another Part of Me,” Jackson utilizes perspective in order to bring a sense of harmony. The second person “you” is plural here and indicates unity. Jackson writes from the perspective of bringing together a “we” that the listener can be part of—a very adept skill employed in several of Jackson’s songs. In the track “Bad,” Jackson uses both forms of the perspectives used in “Leave Me Alone” and “Another Part of Me.”¹⁵

CHARACTERIZATION

Characters are always avatars, expressions of an artist’s creativity, or tools used to advance a particular idea. They can provide multiple perspectives through which we perceive plot. They can be the embodiment of great ideals, based on real human beings, or entirely figments of the author’s imagination. However, what is particularly important about characters in narrative is that they are the conduits through which the reader experiences and engages. Characters are constructed from their external qualities, the physical attributes assigned to them by the author of any work, as well as their internal attributes, the trappings of humanity that make them plausible in a narrative. Hence, a character with a fear of enclosed spaces will have more of a compelling reaction when stuck inside a lift with strangers. There are also the overlapping moments when characters’ internal and external worlds coincide: what the character says and what the other characters say about them. To return to *The Great Gatsby*, notions of who Gatsby is are created by what the narrator, Nick, and several other characters in the novel say and think about him, as much as by his own actions and words.

The fourth track on Jackson’s *Bad* album is called “Liberian Girl,” and it exemplifies beautifully Jackson’s use of characterization in his songs. The eponymous character is clearly: a) an African woman held in high esteem, “more precious than any pearl,” and b) the object of the author’s sexual and emotional desire.¹⁶ The character’s Liberian heritage is a feature so dominant that she is not given any other name. Liberia is a unique “country along the

coast of West Africa . . . home to a lush rainforest containing a rich diversity of flora and fauna.” It is “Africa’s oldest republic” and it “was established on land acquired for freed U.S. slaves.”¹⁷ In that respect, the character embodies the beauty of African nationality and African women in general. Jackson’s beautiful invention sharply contradicts long-purported negative representations of black women, as discussed in Kim F. Hall’s “‘Object into Object?’: Some Thoughts on the Presence of Black Women in Early Modern Culture.”¹⁸

In his essay “‘When You Have to Say ‘I Do’: Orientalism in Michael Jackson’s ‘Liberian Girl,’” Jeremy Faust writes that “Jackson co-opts *Orientalism* towards implying a place for himself within the mainstream of dominant American society,” and although his argument has much merit, he negates the fact that Jackson, although an American, is an African American with a vested interest in his African heritage.¹⁹ The song can just as easily be read to be a love song to Africa. The Liberian girl is not given one of the many names Jackson utilizes throughout all of his back catalogue. Faust rightly asserts that Jackson does not give the Liberian girl a name, yet he is an artist who repeatedly uses female names in his songs.²⁰ A character is often defined first by their name, and second by their dialogue. The girl’s Swahili speech is far more revealing.²¹ She speaks only in response to Jackson’s declarations of love. It is ironic that this girl, whose country’s name is derived from the Latin word for “freedom” and from which we derive the word “liberation,” is the object of affection for a male who is now free to express his affections after she has *changed his world*. She lacks liberation, existing solely as an extension of the singer’s devotion. The internal-external elements of this character remain ambiguous, and the fact that she is prized primarily for her appearance and African-ness is awkward, as is the fact that she is not given a name of her own. “Liberian Girl” is a song about a character constructed entirely from a male perspective; she is an African object of love and desire. However, she is unique in that she is an evidently black African woman placed on the pedestal as the object of affection in a romance. The features that make her uniquely African are the features that make her uniquely precious and “more precious than any pearl.”²² The fact that a pearl is white and that African skin is predominantly a darker shade has resonance here.

SETTING AND TIME

In addition to plot, perspective, and characterization, setting and time can be extremely effective in engaging viewers and readers. Settings can, like characters, embody emotion, just as the weather does in cases of pathetic fallacy. In Emily Brontë’s 1847 novel, *Wuthering Heights*, the wildness and power of the adverse weather on the English moors can easily be interpreted as a

reflection of the wildness of the central characters' (Cathy and Heathcliff) love for one another, a love that is out of their control and dangerous. Likewise, Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" utilizes the ambiguous nature of both time and setting to create a sense of suspense and danger. The narrative of the song takes place in the apartment of what we assume is a single woman. This is an archetypal place for a murder to take place, and the song replays the series of events that "left the bloodstains on the carpet."²³ The crime scene is key here, as in the hardboiled crime-fiction novels of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain.

The crime scene is a timeless setting, a place that is easily transported to various locales. However, our fascination with crime has deep roots in our fascination with both the macabre and the grotesque, a fashion that was expanded in the Victorian era with the publication of gruesome murders.²⁴ The artist Andy Warhol famously embraced newspaper printings of gruesome accidents in his silkscreen, *Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times* in 1963.²⁵ Jackson's transposes the events of the narrative into the 1930s in the short film for the song "Smooth Criminal," a time that is synonymous with glamorized mob crime. Fundamentally, crime is made fascinating in crime-fiction narratives, but the violence that is alluded to by the crime-scene narrative setting takes some of the danger out of the song because its use of tense is intermittently locked into the past. These events have occurred, and there is nothing the reader or viewer can do to alter them. We are passive watchers of a cocooned event. This ambiguity of time is powerfully exhibited in the short film, which in turn is an extract from the full-length movie, *Moonwalker*.²⁶ Jackson plays the character of Michael, an alien who is able to manipulate both time and space, to transport himself between forms and places. Why he chooses the glamorous, crime-riddled 1930s may be because this setting is both close to the present day in terms of style and yet distant enough to be part of a mythic past. Jackson uses setting and time to bring us close, but he sets us apart just enough to maintain the air of mystery

LANGUAGE

The song "Man in the Mirror," like several of the songs on *Bad*, was not written by Jackson, but since Jackson was executive producer of his work, I will assign him credit for the use of the song and for including it on his album. He retains credit for the song in terms of its delivery and its style. "Man in the Mirror" utilizes key language features: imagery and metaphor. The extended metaphor of the song's title is particularly evocative because it relates the idea of the distance between one's actions and one's thoughts.²⁷ Jackson explores, by the use of the metaphor that is extended through the narrative,

the concept that people often want change to occur but do not wish to be that change, nor do they wish to effect that change in their own lives. The song repeats a demand that its listeners turn their gaze inwards.²⁸

The use of imagery in the song is just as evocative as the use of the extended metaphor, if not more so. The narrative style is set by the imagery of a person walking through a street, wearing their preferred attire; we follow them on their journey as they see children playing, and the image resolves itself in a realization that the first-person narrator has been ignoring the needs of others. The power of the metaphor is heightened with a “broken bottle top,” which leads the listener to wonder if the broken bottle is in fact a metaphor for a life that is falling apart. The lines often link back, by anaphoric referencing, giving the imagery of souls flying out of bodies into death, or simply of people living aimlessly due to neglect. The personification of inanimate objects (for example, the wounded willow tree) may indicate the unseen scars caused by emotional wounds. The scars are what produce faded dreams of those without any financial security at all.²⁹ Jackson reiterates the metaphor of the wind, which is incredibly emotive because it implies that the souls of these characters have been made synonymous with wind—incorporeal. They have been rendered as invisible as air by the refusal of others to look at them and truly see their pain, acknowledge it, and then attempt to ameliorate it.

GENRE

The final narrative aspect that Jackson utilizes throughout his work is genre. The word “genre” is derived from the French word for “type” and was employed primarily in the industrialization of film and literature. Films and books are often now marketed by virtue of their genre, to the extent that genre fiction is a commonly accepted term. However, many texts supersede contemporary notions of genre, while others combine so many genres that it is impossible to classify them. Genres offer opportunities for creativity by positioning the viewer to expect a certain theme, and to bring their prior conceptions of a specific theme into the understanding of this new work. So, a reader of science fiction may have expectations of imaginative worlds, which an author can use for heightened effect, as in Ursula Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* or China Mieville’s *Perdido Street Station*.³⁰ For example, “Just Good Friends” is very much in the genre of a buddy movie or rivalry movie, in which two friends fight for the affections of a single love interest, while “I Just Can’t Stop Loving You” is clearly a romance. However, where Jackson is at his best is when he flouts genre conventions completely. “Speed Demon” defies genre. We are presented with a speeding character and left with just that. We are not told exactly where they are going, or exactly why, and instead we are given a

sense of heightened urgency for the journey at hand.³¹ Many of the key features of narrative aspect are forsaken for the tension, and the listener is encouraged to fill in all the narrative gaps.

Narrative is the driving force of all of Michael Jackson's music. However, what is particularly exciting is what occurs when we separate the narrative aspects in each of Jackson's individual works and examine how they create a sense of engagement for readers, listeners, and viewers. This narrative quality may account for the success of Jackson's short films, as they were, in so many ways, narratives set to music.